

# The revolt at Radomir - Tico Jossifort



The story of a little-known Bulgarian anti-war movement; including a 1918 mass mutiny and armed rebellion. This led to fraternisation with Russian troops, the collapse of the Bulgarian war effort, the abdication of the King and a potential revolutionary opportunity.

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'RADOMIR' is a tragic event which occurred in Bulgaria just before the end of the First World War. This had been preceded on two occasions by a dress rehearsal which Bulgaria could well have done without, the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913, wars whose only purpose was to serve as the prelude to the Great War. The Social Democratic Parties of the region had proclaimed:

Let us liberate ourselves from particularism and narrowness, and abolish the frontiers which divide people of similar language and culture, yet who are in part united on the economic plane; let us finally sweep away all forms of foreign domination, and decide our own destiny.

This was no more and no less than the hoped-for Balkan Federation already advocated by these parties. But far too many interests were involved, and the solidarity between neighbours and the 'little' people was not strong enough to resist the intrigues of the great and powerful. Only the result of three wars can explain the horror and despair of the Radomir mutineers.

But if we consider what followed, for the history of this little country did not stop then, we are forced to acknowledge the following - the Russian Revolution of 1917 was preceded by that of 1905, but not by a mutiny of the size of that of Radomir in the army. In Russia, the contradictions became explosive because of their scale - a huge country with a strong concentration of industries and of workers. It was a peasant activist (an agrarian) who led the mutiny of Radomir, not a militant worker. At that time, at the beginning of the twentieth century, every Eastern European country had a strong majority of peasants. The Chinese revolution should be considered as a rising of the peasant masses. Bulgaria was thus, at the beginning of the twentieth century, on an arch separating the two worlds, Asia and Europe. Was it the contradiction between the city and the country which was working itself out at this point?



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### **'Revolution in this Feeble and Undeveloped Country has Driven Them Insane': The Battle of Dobro Pole**

In the autumn of 1918, several signs of discontent were apparent on the southern front of the Bulgarian army. Following the battle of Dobro Pole (which means Pleasant Field) and the severe losses sustained in the ranks of the army, a ministerial reshuffle brought to power Alexander Malinov, who opposed the government from the right. How did this happen?

Already before the outbreak of war, Bulgaria had been assiduously courted by the two sides: by the Entente bloc, whose principal members were France and Britain, and by the Central Powers, whose two main members were Germany and Austria (the Austro-Hungarian Empire).

From the start, the two main opposition parties, the Social Democratic Workers Party (Socialist Tesniak) and the People's Agrarian Union, had advocated the strictest neutrality in the war. However, the dominant classes in the Balkans were far too tied materially and financially to the belligerent blocs to allow the region

and the countries within it to stay out of the hostilities. The ordinary people were also greatly apprehensive. Rumours circulated about the intention of the government to contract loans that effectively constituted a barely-concealed bribe by the 'generous' lenders, Germany and Austria. Other similar gossip circulated concerning the projected construction of railway lines or concessions for the exploitation of coal mines behind the back of Parliament, which led to protests from the opposition.

On 1 August, the entry of Japan into the war extended the theatre of operations to the whole of Asia. Tensions continued to rise, and on 10 November 1914, the leader of the *Tesniaks*, Blagoev, put forward the idea that the Bulgarian Parliament should propose to the other Balkan parliaments the formation of a Balkan Federation, of which more anon. In the summer of 1915, the Radoslavov government entered into secret negotiations with the Central Bloc powers of Europe. Following these events, contacts were established, with the support of the Palace, between the government and the Agrarian Union. A meeting was organised with representatives from the entire opposition. In reality, these soundings served to test the feelings of the deputies after the secret conclusion of the convention for friendship and union which simply announced the entry of Bulgaria into the war. Shortly afterwards, the royal mobilisation decree was issued. The dice had been thrown...

The left-wing socialist *Tesniaks* issued a leaflet at that time which asserted that nothing should divide the Balkan peoples, and that the capitalist and dynastic interests of the ruling classes and dynasties were responsible for hurling them into a fratricidal war. A little earlier, the *Agrarian Standard*, the paper of the Agrarian Union, declared that a single duty rested on Bulgaria and its government: to avoid all involvement in the war. It demanded that Bulgaria should 'stop the house from burning down', and that it ought to avoid any action that went against its well understood interests: 'We condemn every rash act of the government.'

This was obvious to everybody. An overwhelming majority of the population shared this view. The open wounds from the time of the two fratricidal wars between neighbouring peoples had not healed, leaving unhappy memories. The government, however, completely devoted as it was to its king and unable to tolerate the open and frank way that a peasant spoke to him, shed its democratic facade. It dragged the leader of the Agrarian Union, Alexander Stamboliski,[1] before its courts, and condemned him to life imprisonment.

A day of general mobilisation took place on 11 September 1915. The call-up to the colours started with 530 000 soldiers, and others were to follow. They were sent to the southern front, and later went to fight in the north. The memories of the war of 1912 between 'allies'

remained in their heads. Against these unhappy memories what effect could the hymns to

'Greater Bulgaria' in the press have? How straight was the road which ran from the town crier in the village to the printed press! However, this time, leaflets, proclamations and manifestos against the war were numerous.

### **The Tesniak Manifesto Resolution**

On 14 December, the Tesniaks submitted a parliamentary motion in three parts. The first part proposed a letter to the parliaments of all the Balkan countries inviting them to conclude a treaty for union and common defence, the second aimed to contact the governments of the neutral countries calling for a bloc for peace to be formed which would be able to pressure the belligerents to suspend hostilities, and the third called for the suspension of the military mobilisation. When advocating these proposals, the Tesniaks did not hesitate to call for a defensive alliance of the Balkan countries aimed against any invader who threatened their integrity.

Although this memorable act had no effect, the Tesniaks had bravely raised themselves well above the rival right-wing Socialists in their understanding of what was at stake, about the threat which weighed on the little Balkan countries and the measures which had to be taken against the danger that the war posed for them. For the Tesniaks, it was not a question of issuing naive platonic appeals for peace and for concord against discord, which were merely a source of hatred that was being vigorously stoked by the bourgeois chauvinists; the Tesniaks pointed to the key question: federation. They demanded of the Balkan peoples, exhausted by fratricidal wars, that they overcome the effects of the poison of bitterness and resentment, and rise to the occasion.

The Right Socialist Ivan Sakasov showed the irresistible ascendancy of social chauvinism in the Social Democratic parties of the Second International, including his own party: If we could here, in our own country, or in Germany or France, raise ourselves above the national idea, then perhaps we could throw

away our rifles, or better still turn them on the caste that has brought us to this bloody horror; but it is evident that we are children of the soil of sin and, by education and through our psychology, we have submitted to this great idea, and we will be unable to maintain for long the socialist politics which we hitherto have been practising.

The Tesniak Manifesto was a step forward, a victory over evil, that is to say the forces for war, but it remained only an idea. It clearly defined the danger, identified the causes and the protagonists of war and the means of removing the threat, but in order to move from ideas to practice, other parties had to be moved by the same desires. It was precisely this which was lacking, and the parties representing the working-class movement in the Balkans were not able to prevent the involvement of the peninsula in the general melee.

### **'Some Are Dying, Others Are Getting Rich'**

After a while, the social and economic effects of the war started to emerge. The militant Agrarian Raiki Daskalov declared:

The impoverished people desperately cry out and are heard as far as the front line. A deep injustice has occurred. The farmyards and granaries of the peasantry have been forced open.

What they have found they have taken. Women and children have been exploited. They have had to grow sugar beet, but they got no sugar; their milk was taken, but they never saw cheese; commandos armed with authority have plundered the countryside. Some are dying, others are getting rich, and a whole people is being reduced to rriisery. And new millionaires have sprung up. As for our allies, their appetite is limitless. They've taken everything, and the country has become a colony exporting primary products to Germany.

'The king is far away and God is on high', said the popular saying, which spread by word of mouth. Women, children and the elderly openly complained to soldiers on leave. Limited to start with, such complaints ended up by being spread in thousands of letters sent to the soldiers, and their confidence soon became a threat. To be sure, at the start they were only complaints, but with the increasing suffering and misery the tone rose and became angry:

'The soldiers are defending the rich, and the people are dying of hunger! The war is a swindle!'

Meanwhile, Stamboliski had been condemned to life imprisonment, but his morale was unaffected. He had numerous contacts with the militants of the Agrarian Union, and he wrote articles and pamphlets in which he denounced the behaviour of the Right Agrarians who flirted with the government.

At the same time, numerous Tesniaks, including Dimitri Blagoev, G Kirrov, Christo Kabakchiev, Vassil Kolarov and George Dimitrov, were working energetically across the country. Large numbers of protests against the war flared up throughout the country.

The war continued to grind on, and the abuses perpetrated by the requisition campaigns aggravated the social tensions. Their political repercussions led to a move to the left within the Agrarian Union. The Green deputies took more notice of the protests of their leader. Their socialist friends became implacable in their denunciation of the chauvinist policies carried out by the Second International. Their leader, Blagoev, did not hesitate to announce the imminence of revolution, and to declare that this was possible even during hostilities.

The Agrarians resumed the publication of their paper, *The Agrarian Standard*, in the summer of 1917. At the same time came the first reverberations of the Russian Revolution.

However, repression was intensified, the anti-militarist papers were seized by the post office, and the soldiers were searched, but these measures were unable to impede the rise of discontent in the country. In some areas, women staged bread riots. Leaflets spontaneously written on odd sheets of paper were passed from hand to hand. Thus in the Fifth Division, the tone of such writings became both moving and angry: 'We have arms, and in each battle we lose thousands of victims. But if we let ourselves be sacrificed, what happens? Let us, dear comrades, kick out those who sell our dear country. For a free Bulgaria. Long live our protector, Alexander Stamboliski!'

On 5 October 1915, the soldiers of the Twenty-Seventh Brigade at Chepino, members of the Social Democratic Party (Tesniaks) and a member of the Agrarian Union, with among them many young soldiers from Slavitsa (the birth place of Stamboliski), mutinied. Most of them were shot.

Ten months later, on 21 December 1916, there arrived at the First Brigade in the Sofia region an alarming despatch announcing that the soldiers of Dragoman's

Twenty-Fifth Brigade had mutinied, declaring that they would not cross the Danube to invade foreign soil. The Forty-Second Regiment joined in the mutiny, and 80 soldiers demonstrated by firing their rifles in the air. Like lightning the agitation reached the Twenty-First, Thirty-Fifth and Thirty-Sixth Regiments, and finished by hitting the Doxodovski Regiment.

These mutinies were followed by trials, with tragic results. The organiser of the mutiny in the Dragomanski regiment, Yossef Belcher, committed suicide. The ferocious repression did not extinguish the spirit of revolt, which had been brought to a head by the sentiment of despair and by the realisation that this was an impossible situation. And then there was added the extraordinary influence of the Russian Revolution of February 1917, and on the Seret River front in Romania, Bulgarian soldiers were face to face with Russian soldiers.

### **What's a Revolution?**

'What's a revolution?', asked the soldiers who had never heard the word before. Their comrades laughingly explained. If the idea was rather unclear, if there was still difficulty imagining it, everyone sensed that something big, very big, had happened.

Docile until yesterday, the soldiers no longer wished to obey their officers. Links of friendship grew between the two enemy camps, all the more so as those who faced them were the 'bratushki' - little brothers. The soldiers became bolder, running frequently into no man's land to offer now bread, now brandy. And the episodes of fraternisation multiplied, and went beyond the Seret which separated the Bulgarian from the Russian army.

To stop this pernicious wave of fraternisation, the soldiers of the ThirtyFifth Regiment were arrested and tried, and their sentences were publicised. This repression could not prevent the meetings between the soldiers from occurring. They mingled and exchanged letters, leaflets, appeals and photos. They joined together and partied. After meetings between the Bulgarian Parade Regiment and the Siberian Sharp-Shooters Regiment a truce was established that lasted 100 days.

The spirit of peace and fraternisation spread and reached other units such as the Thirty-Fifth, Seventh, Nineteenth, Fifty-Third and Forty-Eighth Regiments. It even reached units on the southern front. Influenced by this agitation, which



quickly reached the rear areas, a delegation of agrarian deputies went to General Gerov, the Chief of Staff. Stamboliski later revealed that the object of this had been to encourage a *coup d'etat*.

Meanwhile the October Revolution had erupted in Russia. The Tesniak paper wrote: At this critical moment, the Bulgarian workers - the most alert part of the Bulgarian people -

have the duty to raise their voices and follow the example of their Russian brothers. This struggle has to take place. Its outcome is not in doubt; in spite of obstacles, in spite of casualties, whatever they may be, the result of this struggle will be the triumph of the people over their oppressors and plunderers, the triumph of democracy over the monarchy, and the triumph of revolutionary socialism over the political and economic yoke. The dawn of socialism and liberty is at hand.

This Tesniak manifesto was one of support, encouragement and agitation, but it did not call for a revolt or an uprising.

The news of the Russian Revolution badly affected the atmosphere on the two fronts. A hail of capital sentences hit the soldiers. On the southern front, the situation continued to deteriorate, and the provisioning of the forces got worse. Morale was at its lowest. The Chief of Staff, General Gerov, did not hide the fact. In his report of 12 June 1918, he put forward his hope that political compromises would calm public opinion without affecting the army.

To give room for manoeuvre, an old leader of the Right Opposition, Alexander Malinov, was named President of the Council.

## **The General Revolt**

The decisive battle of Dobro Pole opened at six o'clock in the morning of 14 September 1918.

On the Bulgarian front were positioned the Second Division from the town of Plevain, and several other regiments, including the Tenth and the Thirtieth. Facing them, the armed forces of the Entente were greatly superior in numbers and armaments - 57 000 against 15 000

Bulgarians. The confrontation continued for two days, and culminated in hand-

to-hand fighting. In total, the Cheinovo Regiment lost two-thirds of its effectives, and the Tenth Regiment lost 840 soldiers. The heavy losses suffered by the Bulgarian army units led to the opening of the front, and ended with a general mutiny among the units engaged. At the head of the uprising were to be found the Second and Third Infantry Divisions, who abandoned their positions and took the road back to the old Greek-Bulgarian frontier. In their retreat to

the north, along the river Vardar, these units took the Fourth and Fifth Divisions along with them.

In a few days, 22-27 September 1918, the uprising involved every unit stationed in the Vardar plain up to the Bitolia region. Some were driven by a desperate desire to get peace somehow or other, while others, aware of the tragic limitations of their choice, could see no other way than to turn their revolt into an uprising against all those who were politically responsible for throwing the country and army into this adventure. The desertion which occurred at Dobro Pole became a rising against the instigators of the war. The Bulgarian

'Tommies' of Dobro Pole did not throw down their arms, but turned them against their leaders.

The rebels regrouped after leaving the front line or during the course of their retreat to the rear. A new army was formed, for good or ill, in great haste. The result of this haste, the outcome of despair, weighed heavily on the troops, and was felt in the battles that followed.

Meanwhile, the Headquarters, which was well informed about the events at the front, prepared its defence. The Reserve Officers School was mobilised. However, a contretemps ensued: the officer cadets at Kustendil rebelled. The King met urgently with high state officials. The Council unanimously called for an armistice. However, Ferdinand, puffed up with pride, had other plans, which threw the members of the government into despair, and as a result nothing was decided.

Negotiators hastened to Salonika. The US Embassy was contacted. The generals consulted were of the same opinion: they were all for an armistice. The next day, the President of the Council, Malinov, sent three urgent letters to the King asking for an agreement on the laying down of arms. The pace of events quickened; Stamboliski, yesterday sentenced to life imprisonment, and whose release was

now announced, demanded of the Minister of War, Savov, the release of all the other political prisoners whom he had met in his cell. The meeting of the prisoner with the minister only served to sound out the situation - the first approach between the two opposing camps, both engaged in a subtle game.

There was much to play for in the meeting with the King which followed soon after (and the details of which were only published later by the head of the government). A bargain was offered: the King informed his Agrarian opponent that he would consent to an armistice, but in return Stamboliski would meet the mutineers. Stamboliski had won immense prestige among the soldiers during the period of hostilities. It seemed that from now on the road to an armistice was open. A negotiating delegation was set up. The Agrarian leader showed no hesitation. It was an act of great cunning to include the Agrarian with the Tesniaks, of whom a certain number, among them George Dimitrov, were still in prison.

On 26 September, the Agrarian leader, accompanied by his friend Raiko Daskalov, deputies and ministers, among whom was Minister General Savov, left for the town of Radomir to pacify the soldiers and put an end to the mutiny. The results were far from being determined in advance. Did the opposing side, that is to say the Entente, want to end the war?

### **The Proclamation of the Republic**

The first contacts with the mutinous soldiers went badly. It was on the next day that things started to move on the initiative of Daskalov, who peremptorily proclaimed the republic and the deposition of the Tsar and his government. This was the start of the glorious and tragic story of the Republic of Radomir.

The telegram issued by the new Chief of Staff declared that only a republic could save Bulgaria from foreign enemies and internal conflicts. Stamboliski acquiesced and agreed to become the Provisional President of the Republic. The commander of the new rebel army,

Daskalov, recommended 'that the soldiers organise themselves into units and choose their officers'.

The news of the revolt and the long march of the rebels on the capital reached the mining town of Pernik, 30 kilometres from Sofia. Hlachev described the agitation among the workers in this town. Daskalov appealed to them: 'The

banner of revolution is raised, it is the flag of the republic. These are your ideals, come and join this uprising.'

But two MPs brought the reply of the Tesniak Central Committee from Kabakchiev. And this reply was 'Neutrality'.

### **The Evasion**

This was the official response of the Tesniaks. From then on it was the end of the revolution.

A year later, their leader Blagoev described the exchange he had had with the Agrarian spokesman, Alexander Stamboliski: 'He said to me: we will not take power with any party other than yours. You are strong in the towns, and ourselves in the country; together we will take power, what do you think?'

Blagoev replied: 'The Tesniak Party cannot take power with the Agrarian Union because the two parties are different.'

Stamboliski: 'No, we are not very different from you; I accept all your programme except one point, that of the small-holders: we will not touch them.'

Blagoev: 'Maybe, but even so our party will not take power with yours. But if you accept our party's programme...'

And later Blagoev argued: 'Nearly everyone in our party was with the colours, dispersed on every front. Behind the lines there was nothing, the branches only had a handful of members.'

And in the capital it was the same if not worse... It was clear that the Central Committee had no physical possibility of taking charge of this revolution.'

Manifestly, this was not the real reason. Much later, in 1948, George Dimitrov, who, it should be said, had taken part in these events, put forward a judgement, a little short but not without truth: 'The main reason [for the abstention of the Tesniaks] lay in the doctrinal side, in the non-Bolshevik conception, in the methods and traditions of Tesmak socialism.'

Why, after Radomir, did the Tesniaks, bitter enemies of the war, carry on with this seemingly inexplicable abstentionism? In reality, this historical impasse was

the logical consequence of the politics of the revolutionary wing of the young Bulgarian Social Democratic Party. Barely emerged from a centuries-long oppression, with capitalist development hardly started, Bulgaria clashed with other powers endowed with military resources and modern production; the running together of the wars of liberation with the imperialist wars did not help. The bourgeoisie was clever enough to turn the euphoria of the wars of liberation to its profit and to exploit them for its own enterprises of conquest. The fact that the Tesniaks found themselves on the divide between two worlds, that of the Second International and that of the Bolsheviks, did not help their development. Already before the war, Blagoev considered the Bulgarian pupils of Lenin to be 'anarchist extremists'. It was the same type of criticism that the Second International and the Mensheviks made of Lenin and his protagonists, the term

'anarchist' signifying a mismatch between means and ends (socialism or the coming to power of the working class) and an estimation of the objective conditions which would enable them to come to power. For Russia, it would mean that conditions were not sufficiently ripe for the proletariat to come to power by revolution. Now, in the polemic between the Menshevik Plekhanov and Lenin, Blagoev tended towards the former, even if in the course of the war the cards ended up shuffled about.

So we can now understand the sense that Dimitrov gave to his criticism of the neutrality that the Tesniaks wanted to observe during the revolt at Radomir and after by using the expression of an excess of doctrinairism or dogmatism.

None of this helped the Tesniaks to clarify their relations with the peasant world. They never found a common language with the Agrarians. Not only before the revolt at Radomir, but above all afterwards, the workers' movement and the peasants movement were unable to march together. And as a result, the bourgeoisie defeated them separately.[2]

Until the end of the century, the peasant question remained a stumbling block for every tendency in the workers' movement. Nevertheless, in Bulgaria the principle of cooperation very soon became popular in an agricultural sector based upon tiny properties. It continued to obtain excellent results, in spite of the obstacles inherent in a sclerotic socialism, not to mention the lamentable setback represented by the agricultural complexes dreamt up by the neo-Stalinist Todor Zhivkov.

But let us return to Radomir. The core of the insurgent army of 10 000 men was organised in five divisions. On 28 September, at about 10 o'clock at the Zaharna Works railway station on the site of an old factory, a train arrived from the front, the majority of those on board being wounded. A whole detachment from the military school armed with machine guns waited for them. The start of a dialogue was enough for the officer cadets to open fire immediately.

There were hundreds of victims in the carnage. A commission of enquiry subsequently sought to establish the responsibility for this bloody incident.

## **The Carnage**

On 29 September 1918, the leader of the rebel army and the mutineers were already in the village of Vladaia, very near to Sofia. But Stamboliski was not with them. He told the authorities that he had escaped from his captivity by the rebels while his friend Raiko Daskalov had been forced to declare himself their military leader. A curious and ambiguous situation ensued, in which the state power did not dare to arrest the agrarian ex-prisoner, but was able to force him via the telegraph to renounce his new title of President of the Republic, and to call on the insurgents to surrender.

The country held its breath, awaiting the imminent battle that would clarify the deeply confused and uncertain situation. The attack of 29 September was the culminating point of the engagement. Thanks to the superiority of the opposing force both in number and armament massed against them, the rebels were finally swept away. In spite of the determination of the insurgents, their attempt to break the line of defences failed. After the battle, some attempted to hide by discarding their uniforms, while others tried to return to their villages or took to guerrilla warfare for many a long year. Three thousand rebels were captured, most of them wounded, and the rest exhausted and in a piteous state. Dozens of the defenceless wounded were finished off without pity. Before a parliamentary enquiry in 1922, when the Agrarian Party was in power, witnesses told of episodes of ferocious carnage.

By 2 December 1918, the rebellion had been definitely put down. But the country was still in a state of war. Everyday life in the country seemed to be suspended by the feeling of uncertainty. The threat of seeing the King topple the government with the help of German Army units bothered numerous ministers. Worried, the government expressed the hope that units of the French Army

would soon enter Bulgaria.

Events moved quickly. The King called upon the commander of the capital, General Protogerov, to arrest the members of the government in a coup d'etat. After briefly agreeing, the general went into hiding; the King, having played his last card, was obliged to abdicate, and that was the end of his reign.

Negotiations began, leading to the armistice. Following the defeat of the rising, 10 000

soldiers were imprisoned. Kolarov later reported on the penalties suffered by the survivors of the revolt. Lenin denounced the conditions of the armistice on 8 November: Take Bulgaria. You would have thought that a country like Bulgaria could hold no terror for the Anglo-American imperialist colossus. Nevertheless, the revolution in this small, weak, absolutely helpless country caused the Anglo-Americans to lose their heads and present armistice terms that are tantamount to occupation."

The Radomir revolt was no vain adventure. It forced Bulgaria out of the conflict, deposed King Ferdinand (even if the monarchy survived), and contributed to ending the war.

## **NOTES**

1] Alexander Stamboliski (1879-1923) led the Bulgarian Agrarian National Union from 1906.

The BANU did well in the general elections in August 1919, and Stamboliski became Prime Minister. General elections in March 1920 and April 1923 saw the BANU increase its vote, but the government led by Stamboliski was overthrown by a right-wing coup in June 1923, and Stamboliski was assassinated by Macedonian nationalists at the same time.

2] The Bulgarian Communist Party did not go to the assistance of Stambolisky's government when it was faced with a right-wing coup in 1923, on the grounds that the BANU was just another bourgeois party. The party subsequently suffered repression, which was intensified after some of its members attempted to assassinate the government by blowing up Sofia Cathedral during an official funeral in 1925.

3] VI Lenin, 'Speech on the International Situation', *Collected Works*, Volume 28, Moscow, 1977, p157.

**Source;** *Revolutionary History*, Volume 8, no 2; Porcupine Press/Socialist Platform Ltd, London, 2002.